

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

DEVARIM

VAETCHANAN

EKEV

RE'EH

SHOFTIM

KI TEITZEI

KI TAVO

NITZAVIM

VAYELECH

HAAZINU

V'ZOT
HABRACHA

46

EKEV

THE BAKER'S SECRET

After listing the seven fruits of Israel, the Torah describes the Israel as: 'a Land where you will eat bread without poverty - you will lack nothing there...And you shall eat and you shall be satisfied and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good Land which He has given you.'¹ This verse indicates that whenever one eats a meal with bread and is sated, one is required to say Grace after Meals.² This raises a number of questions.

Firstly, it is understandable for God, as the source of all blessing, to bless man - but **how is it possible for finite man to bless God?** Thanking and acknowledging seem to be within the capability of man - but to *bless* implies filling a void. What could God possibly lack?

Secondly, why does the Grace after Meals apply only to bread? Immediately prior to this verse, the Torah describes the land in relation to the seven species. Surely they too require a blessing of such significance?

Fruits and vegetables are entirely natural and almost wholly dependent on factors external to human control. Their growth and quality are dictated by the nutrients in the ground and the rain from the heavens. In contrast, bread cannot grow on its own. It takes a lengthy process involving: 'sowing, ploughing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading and baking.'³ One might assume that fruits, created entirely by God Himself, are holier than bread. Yet, it is the very fact that bread requires human involvement that leads to its elevated sanctity.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains that in the process of bread making, where a person plays such a critical role, he or she is in essence re-creating creation.⁴ This is the task of man - to partner with God as a co-creator, as the Torah states, 'be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and master it.'⁵ **Bread is the symbol of our mission in life - to take that which God gives us,**

whether it is raw wheat or raw talent, and to 'master it', to re-create it into much more.

Rabbi Soloveitchik uses Mount Sinai and Mount Moriah as an example. Mount Sinai is the location of one of the greatest events in human history - the Revelation of God's Torah. At that time, the mountain attained tremendous holiness, so much so that, 'whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death.'⁶ However, following the Revelation, it resumes its ordinary status. Mount Moriah, on the other hand, is inherently sanctified. It is the setting of the *Akeda* - the Binding of Isaac - where Abraham and Isaac commit themselves absolutely to God's will.⁷ The Midrash attests: 'before Abraham, God was called "God of the heavens"; after Abraham, people called Him "God of the heavens and the earth."⁸ Abraham's unique role was creating a home for God on earth. Mount Moriah is also the site where both Temples were built - the ultimate home on earth, built by man, for God.

The message is clear: **That which God alone performs attains transient holiness, but where God is joined by man, it is deemed holy forever.** It is for this reason that bread, reflecting our partnership with God, attains the greatest level of holiness. Through the act of re-creating that which God created, we bless God.

So why do we recite Grace after Meals after eating bread and not other foods? While it is obvious that the success of crops ultimately lies in God's will, it can be more difficult to notice God's role in the creation of man-made products. Thus, one may conclude that bread is the product of man's creation alone. The same extends to all of man's accomplishments. While there may be no atheists in foxholes, the opposite is also often true; one forgets to acknowledge God when things are going well. As the Torah commands: 'and you shall remember the Lord your God, for He is the one who gives you strength to make wealth.'⁹

We are therefore required to refocus our minds on God as the source of all goodness, and to acknowledge His role. Through the Grace after Meals, said specifically after eating man-made bread, the Torah is reminding us of the ultimate Creator: 'Lest you eat and become satisfied and you build good houses and settle... And you shall say in your heart, "my strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth."¹⁰

We must realise the power of human involvement in partnering with God and the transcendental sanctity that this can create. At



the same time, we must never forget the divine source; our re-creations are based upon the Creator's creations. Making blessings in life, therefore, are our opportunity to transform life into the ultimate blessing.

Parasha Fact:

The obligation to thank God after we eat is mentioned in this week's parasha and from this, the Talmud deduces logically that we should recite a blessing before we are even full.

Notes

¹ Deuteronomy 8:9-10.

² Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Berachot* 48b.

³ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Shabbat* 74b.

⁴ Dr. Arnold Lustiger, "The American Jew and the State of Israel," in *Derashot HaRav: Selected Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Ohr Publishing, 2003), 167.

⁵ Genesis 1:28.

⁶ Exodus 19:12.

⁷ Genesis 22:1-18.

⁸ *Sifrei*, Haazinu 313.

⁹ Deuteronomy 8:18.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 8:12, 17.

Next week in Re'eh :

As time marches relentlessly forward, new discoveries are constantly being made, causing the world to be in a perpetual state of growth and evolution. Every single day, great strides are made in technology, and every single moment, scientific advances are made at a pace that outsteps even the greatest scientists themselves. Not least among these are the advances in the field of communication, which has revolutionised the world and transformed, for eternity, the global into the local. At what cost, however, is the world evolving? How far-reaching is the impact? Is it conceivable that these technological successes might actually be impacting our ability to fulfil some of our most basic biblical obligations?

שבת שלום